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Julian Barnes's England, England *as a Condition of England Novel*

Condition of England novels are born out of the acknowledgement of – as Steven Connor put it – "the potential of the novel to imagine, project and preserve forms of national and collective identity." The task to represent England and Englishness is usually undertaken in what is perceived to be a time of political, economic and cultural transformations. In his outline of this fictional tradition Connor points out that this potential is best actualised in realist fiction, where "realist" is taken to mean the opposite of "experimental." He traces the origin of the phenomenon to the Victorian novel which responded to the imperative to diagnose the condition of the country and society. Referring to D.H. Lawrence's fiction to challenge the widely held belief that modernism recoiled from the public perspective in fiction, Connor nevertheless largely concedes that it was only the post-Second-World-War novel that consciously resumed the nineteenth-century aspiration to analyse and display in fiction the condition of England.[1] Margaret Drabble's novels correspond to the writer's well-known identification with the realist tradition as well as her ambition to provide a fictional portrayal of England and Englishness. Angus Wilson's

[1] S. Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950–1995* (London: Routledge, 1996) 44–47.

books also aim at a panoramic sweep, comprising a comprehensive, representative cast of characters and range of experience. Through their choice of characters and situations, condition-of-England novels aim at a general portrait, a sense of recognisable typicality.

Although Julian Barnes's book does contain many of these features, the writer himself is inclined to the less definite term "an idea of England" novel (as he put it in an interview[2]), possibly due to the traditional associations of the "condition of England" novel with the realist mode, from which both this book and some of his earlier novels depart. This novel is also less ambitious in scope and concentrates on a small group of like-minded characters rather than seeking to comprise a wide social spectrum. What is also immediately noticeable is that *England, England* situates itself apart from the realist tradition by its futuristic setting. It must have been the looming end of the millennium that prompted the writer to join the world-wide debate on what was past and what was to come – the book was published in 1998. The characters frequently refer to the fact that they live in the third millennium. Although Barnes imagines England of the near-future where certain symptoms detectable today have fully taken shape, he takes his cue from the present. Hence *England, England*, owing to the short albeit unspecified temporal gap between the present and the time in the novel, overtly sets itself up as an evaluative vision of contemporary England. The assessment is a critical one – Barnes's book clearly seeks to diagnose the condition of England in the context of the dystopian tradition. The dystopian heritage behind Barnes's book is further confirmed by locating the improved version of England on an island (where the island of Great Britain is treated as the mainland). True to other island stories and ideal state stories, Barnes devotes most of the book to depicting the

[2]J. Lanchester, "A Vision of England," *Electronic Telegraph* 29 Aug. 1998.

functioning of "England, England" and showing why individuals cannot adapt to such supposed perfection. This part of the book, also called "England, England," constitutes the majority and the core of the text. The first and third part focus, respectively, on the childhood and old age of the main character Martha Cochrane. She also features in Part Two as the actual leader of "England, England"; however, portrayal of her methods of running the state and their underlying assumptions by far marginalise such personal life as she may have. Although there is a certain lack of balance in the writer's attempt at combining individual life with national history, Barnes's design also in this sense locates the book in the condition of England mode, even if the execution of the plan is at times less than satisfactory.

Martha's role in administering "England, England" can be traced back to her childhood, sketched in the opening chapter characteristically entitled "England." Her fragmented, isolated memories fail to fall into a coherent sequence. When asked what her first memory is, Martha invents her first "artfully, innocently arranged lie" and realises that others tell lies, too. The original lie takes on shape in the act of telling and retelling. A memory, Martha discovers, can be completely detached from what really happened and therefore liable to arbitrary modifications. Doing her Counties of England jigsaw puzzle, which Martha later presents as her first memory, provides a link between private and national past. Failure to do the puzzle brings on "a sense of desolation, failure and disappointment at the imperfection of the world" until her father helps her fill in the missing pieces, making "her jigsaw, her England and her heart . . . whole again" (5–6).[3] When her father goes away with one of the jigsaw pieces in his pocket, Martha's version of England remains forever incomplete. Her

[3]All page references are to J. Barnes, *England, England* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998).

eventual disposal of all the pieces prefigures her abandonment of actual England. After many years Martha's meeting with her father fails to bridge the gap between them, just as it fails to bridge the gap between her happy childhood and her incipient adulthood, since her father cannot even remember she ever did jigsaw puzzles. This leaves Martha free to construct and manipulate her private past.

Simultaneously, she learns to mistrust national past: "It was like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself" (6). Her history teacher is compared to a priestess leading the children to worship national history. History is taught in the form of rhymes combining names, dates and catch-phrases, and followed by rhythmic clapping. This reduction of history to a game of sounds and rhythms has its parallel in the common recitation of prayers, on which occasions Martha blasphemously plays with similar-sounding words.

Consequently, embarking on adulthood involves a radical break with her past. Independence and maturity in Martha's case are defined by her self-invented rule that after twenty-five you must not hold your parents responsible for your life. The erosion of identification with the past, combined with blurring the distinction between appearance and reality, truth and make-believe, authenticity and pretence, inform the subsequent establishment of "England, England." The idea does not come from Martha originally, but, holding the post of Appointed Cynic, she comes to play a vital role in the realisation of the project and its later refinement. Barnes's book is a fictional exploration of the phenomenon that has been dubbed "the invention of tradition" (after the work of Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Granger). In an interview, Barnes explicitly identified his corroboration of the term: "I am interested in what you might call the invention of tradition. Getting its history wrong is part of becoming a nation. And we do the same thing

with our own lives. We invent, ransack and reorder our childhood."[4]

Lack of a tangible past and confusion of the real/false categories likewise characterise the initiator of the "England, England" project Sir Jack Pitman. He deliberately maintains an air of obscurity about his national and social origin. His often proclaimed commitment to English history and tradition is in practice nothing but the celebration of a few selected emblems for the purposes of self-aggrandisement. Pitman House, the headquarters of his company, eclectically combines commitment to past styles with requirements of modern social and environmental attitudes. Episodes such as using a Henry Moore maquette for an ashtray serve as obvious pointers to Sir Jack's cultural and intellectual paucity. Pitman's supposed self-proclaimed patriotism, although in part sincere, is merely a thin ideological cover on his enormous vanity, snobbery and sense of omnipotence derived from his wealth. As head of his company Pitman sets himself up as a semi-divine, almost royal figure. In making this man the butt of his irony, Barnes quite explicitly points to money as the single sustaining force underlying the contemporary utopia of an ideal England. Tradition, the book suggests, is nowadays invented to be capitalised on. Reviewers of the novel identify tycoons such as Rupert Murdoch or Robert Maxwell as models for the grotesque caricature.[5] John Carey states that the writer's aim is to present the businessman as a freak and business success as vulgar and crude,[6] while Lucy Kellaway in *Prospect* detects in Barnes "the old snobberies (of the literary world) about commerce."[7]

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[4]J. Barnes in an interview with P. Denning, "Inventing England," *The Irish Times* 8 Sept. 1998.

[5]R. Eder, "Tomorrowland," *New York Times Book Review* 9 May 1999; L. Kellaway, "We Can't Do Business," *Prospect* Oct. 1998.

[6]J. Carey, "Land of Make-Believe," *Sunday Times* 23 Aug. 1998.

[7]Kellaway.

"England, England" comes into being as a result of Pitman's ambition that, having achieved all, he needs "one last great idea." He asserts that only money is real (31); accordingly, his last great idea is a business enterprise. His business partner is Jerry Batson, whose efficiency and total lack of principles enable him to cooperate with all manner of organisations and causes, often contradictory ones. The narration stresses the susceptibility of "the whole of darkened, sparkling London" behind the glass wall to the decisions of the two men at the top of Pitman House.

In so far as Britain's loss of position is now taken for granted, it still, ironically, is supposed to have a means of revival by reificating, privatising and selling its past. This ambitious act of "pro-active patriotism" involves converting the Isle of Wight into a theme park devoted to English history and heritage, which, however, aspires to replace the original with its improved, augmented and intensified version. Eventually, the replica prevails over the original. "Pro-active patriotism" precludes treating the past as other than saleable commodity.

The future-oriented modern approach has replaced ineffectual ancestor-worship, nostalgia for the British Empire or apprehension about the possible disintegration of the United Kingdom with the philosophy of looking ahead and a pragmatic accommodation to historical tendencies. Instead of continuing to act as "an emblem of decline, a moral and economic scarecrow," England must sell itself as a product (39–40). Barnes's diagnosis cannot strike us as very original: England's near-future has been shown as determined by overwhelming market forces and the growth of consumer culture, which make the country liable to the whims of financial tycoons such as Pitman, occasionally parading under the guise of patriotic impulses.

Although the book makes it clear that "England, England" is little more than a crude application of the personal ambition of an unsophisticated mind, the writer, with unmistakable irony,

demonstrates its possible vindication in the context of fashionable postmodern approaches. The flying visit of an unnamed French intellectual lends the project some spurious gloss of theory. Wearing suitably cosmopolitan garments and glibly punctuating the speech by allusions to Baudrillard and a host of other thinkers of past and present he makes the claim that the replica of England is preferable to the original since we live in a world of similacra and endlessly sliding referents, where the concept of authenticity has been irrevocably challenged. As the intellectual leaves for another conference, work on the practical establishment of "England, England" begins.

In accordance with basic marketing strategies, market research is first conducted among both the English and foreigners on their knowledge of English history and heritage. The survey carried out among middle-aged, middle-class, white, educated, cultured and supposedly well-informed English people reveals an amalgam of vaguely remembered facts uneasily coexisting with fiction – legends, anecdotes, self-flattering stereotypes (possibly, a result of the kind of history teaching Martha was exposed to): "Most people remembered history in the same conceited yet evanescent fashion as they recalled their own childhood" (82). The book satirises national clichés, insisting that the present idea of Englishness is a construct that can easily be replaced by another, which is what actually happens in the story.

Analysing the invention of tradition in the novel, Vera Nünning observes that "the whole plan appears less and less absurd as the story progresses."[8] Paradoxically, it is history that is evoked in the Isle of Wight's declaration of independence. Lawyers and historians are set to work and dutifully produce evidence that the

[8]V. Nünning, "The Invention of Cultural Traditions: the Construction and Deconstruction of Englishness and Authenticity in Julian Barnes' *England, England*," *Anglia* 119.1 (2001): 60.

Island was purchased by the British Crown unlawfully, which the European Union accepts. England itself is too inefficient to object, and anyway Gibraltar and the Falklands have already been relinquished. Isle of Wight councillors are easily persuaded that Pitman House is as good a centre of power as Westminster, whereas the hope of immediate personal financial gains as well as future tourist prospects for the Island pave the way for the enormous enterprise. Downright bribery and careful sponsorship of certain parties and newspapers help Jack Pitman achieve total control of "England, England." Relocating, or in most cases constructing replicas of the most characteristic English sites as identified in an international survey – all within easy reach and thoughtfully accommodated to visitors' needs – makes the Island a tourist Mecca. Actors are employed to enact English myths or impersonate historical celebrities. Although the version of England is constructed on the basis of the medley of stereotypes revealed in the international survey, the final version is slanted by Pitman and his team. The official propaganda of free market and democracy conceals the actual autocracy of the financial tycoon. After Pitman's downfall following the disclosure of his sexual transgressions, Martha Cochrane takes over. Having discarded Pitman's exorbitant private ambitions and grand pronouncements, she runs "England, England" with impersonal efficiency as Chief Executive Officer.

Barnes's ironic presentation of commerce-dominated England takes on a noticeable political tinge. The narrator openly calls the ideal island state something "to gladden the heart of Adam Smith" – a locus of uncluttered supply and demand. Structures are simple and effective, complications not allowed to arise; there is no crime and no judicial system; such misdemeanour as there occurs is rectified by job-retraining. Categories of moral or immoral conduct have also dissolved, having been supplanted by terms and conditions of contracts. The book satirises liberal policies at their extreme. There is no need for welfare programmes because the old,

the longterm sick and the socially dependent have been shipped off to the mainland. Representatives of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund endorse "England, England" fully as "a pure market state": "People have been trying to find new ways to live for centuries. Remember all those hippie communes? They always failed, and why? Because they failed to understand two things: human nature, and how the market works. What's happening on the Island is a recognition that man is a market-driven animal, that he swims in the market like a fish in the sea" (183–184).

The irony of course is that the extreme development of free market policy has led to the monopoly of one company, and the perfection can only be maintained by rigid adherence to economic laws, even to the detriment of personal freedom. History is openly tampered with, and although the Official Historian is on duty, nobody ever asks him questions. But the historian himself contributes to the construction of tradition, recognising that the past is so problematic that it does not automatically generate any national identity, so the invented identity can just as well be a marketable one. The actual severance of links with the past, replacing originals with replicas emphasise the essential artificiality of the utopian ideal. More and more individuals find themselves unable to adjust (to the pure market state). Martha Cochrane herself begins to resent the constraints of her position, which corresponds to her growing need of meaningful relationships and her quest for some transcendental meaning in life. She concludes that her own crisis matches the nation's loss of faith, which destroys any stabilising meaning.

Barnes does not try to envisage a future for "England, England." Instead, he takes his heroine out of it. She returns to Old England as a prodigal daughter. At this point, Barnes presents us with yet another utopian ideal of England – a nostalgic recreation of the past. The prosperity of "England, England" has accelerated

the decline of the old country. England has progressively shed its power, some of its territory, wealth, influence and population, but above all its sense of identity. A black scenario (hastily sketched) actualises itself: Wales and Scotland break away, the economy collapses, the departure of the royal family starts a wave of emigration. European officials, after some feeble attempts at rescue, are pleased to portray England as a disciplinary example to other countries. The French additionally take the opportunity to replace the Greenwich Meridian with Paris Mean Time and rename the English Channel as the French Sleeve.

Having reached the nadir, England launches a period of renewal, which is reversion to insularity, isolationism, the idea of self-sufficiency. The country declares its separateness from the rest of the world and renames itself Anglia. This is what Martha Cochrane finds on return. She responds to the changed conditions of England with ambivalence, clearly shared by the writer himself. The depiction of miserable technological and economic backwardness is followed by an equally long record of nostalgic restoration of tradition and ceremonies, pastoral peace, native landscape, the pound and old measurements. While the presentation of "England, England" is unmistakably ironic, more complex feelings surround the author's vision of England trying to turn back time. The narrative sums up the ambivalent image as "neither idyllic nor dystopic" (256). Martha is not sure "if Anglia had done right, if a nation could reverse its course and its habits. Was it mere willed antiquarianism, as *The Times* alleged – or had that trait been part of its nature, its history, anyway? Was it a brave new venture, one of spiritual renewal and moral self-sufficiency, as political leaders maintained? Or was it simply inevitable, a forced response to economic collapse, depopulation and European revenge?" (257). But of course the state of Anglia by no means represents a jump back in time where the lost pre-industrial idealised condition could be naturally discovered. "Olde England" has to

be painstakingly recreated or reinvented. Vera Nünning remarks that, paradoxically, both ventures, although in different ways, seek to construct an England of the past by adjusting the past to present needs.[9] The narrative leaves Martha an old woman, passively and half-heartedly merging into village life and envying children their simple faith and innocence.

[9]Nünning 72.